

From: CRITICAL THINKING, Informal Logic

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The word '**critical**' derives from two Greek roots: "kriticos" (meaning discerning judgment) and "kriterion" (meaning standards). Etymologically, then, the word implies the development of "discerning judgment based on standards" (those standards are derived from the trivium).

1. **Uncritical Persons** (intellectually unskilled thinkers)

The over-whelming preponderance of people have not freely decided what to believe, but, rather, have been socially conditioned (indoctrinated) into their beliefs. They are unreflective thinkers. Their minds are products of social and personal forces they neither understand, control, nor concern themselves with. Their personal beliefs are often based in prejudices. Their thinking is largely comprised of stereotypes, caricatures, oversimplifications, sweeping generalizations, illusions, delusions, rationalizations, false dilemmas, and begged questions. Their motivations are often traceable to irrational fears and attachments, personal vanity and envy, intellectual arrogance and simple-mindedness. These constructs have become a part of their identity.

Such persons are focused on what immediately affects them. They see the world through ethnocentric and nationalistic eyes. They stereotype people from other cultures. When their beliefs are questioned — however unjustified those beliefs may be — they feel personally attacked. When they feel threatened, they typically revert to infantile thinking and emotional counter attacks.

When *their* prejudices are questioned, they often feel offended and stereotype the questioner as "intolerant" and "prejudiced." They rely on sweeping generalizations to support their beliefs. They resent being "corrected," disagreed with, or criticized. They want to be re-enforced, flattered, and made to feel important. They want to be presented with a simple-minded, black-and-white, world. They have little or no understanding of nuances, fine distinctions, or subtle points.

They want to be told who is evil and who is good. They see themselves as "good." They see their enemies as "evil." They want all problems to admit to a simple solution and the solution to be one they are familiar with — for example, punishing those who are evil by use of force and violence. Visual images are much more powerful in their minds than abstract language. They are overly impressed by authority, power, and celebrity. They are eminently ready to be directed and controlled, as long as those doing the controlling flatter them and lead them to believe that their views are correct and insightful.

The mass media are structured to appeal to such persons. Subtle and complex issues are reduced to simplistic formulas ("Get tough on crime! Three strikes and you're out! Adult crime, adult time! You are either for us or against us!") Spin is everything; substance is irrelevant.

2. Skilled Manipulators (weak-sense critical thinkers)

There is a much smaller group of people who are skilled in the art of manipulation and control. These people are shrewdly focused on pursuing their own interest without respect to how that pursuit affects others. Though they share many of the characteristics of uncritical thinkers, they have qualities that separate them from uncritical persons. They have greater command of the rhetoric of persuasion. They are more sophisticated, more verbal, and generally have greater status. On average, they have more schooling and achieve more success than uncritical persons. They typically acquire more power and occupy positions of authority. They are accustomed to playing the dominant role in relationships. They know how to use the established structure of power to advance their interests. Since they are fundamentally concerned, not with advancing rational values, but with getting what they want, they are careful to present themselves as sharing the values of those they manipulate.

Skilled manipulators are rarely insightful dissenters, rebels, or critics of society. The reason is simple. They cannot effectively manipulate members of a mass audience if they appear to that mass to be invalidating their beliefs.

Manipulators do not use their intelligence for the public good. Rather they use it to get what they want in alliance with those who share their vested interests. Manipulation, domination, demagoguery, and control are their tools.

Persons skilled in manipulation want to influence the beliefs and behavior of others. And they have insight into what makes people vulnerable to manipulation. As a result, they strive to appear before others in a way that associates themselves with power, authority, and conventional morality. This impetus is evident, for example, when politicians appear before mass audiences with well-polished, but intellectually empty, speeches.

There are a number of alternative labels for the roles that "manipulators" play, including: the spin master, the con artist, the sophist, the propagandist, the indoctrinator, the demagogue, and often, the "politician." Their goal is always to control what others think and do by controlling the way information is presented to them. They use "rational" means only when such means can be used to create the appearance of objectivity and reasonability. The key is that they are always trying to keep some information and some points of view from being given a fair hearing.

3. Fair-Minded Critical Persons (strong-sense critical thinkers)

Finally, there is an even smaller group of people who, though intellectually skilled, do not want to manipulate and control others. These are the people who combine critical thought, fair-mindedness, self-insight, and a genuine desire to serve the public good; the fully integral person. They are sophisticated enough to recognize how self-serving people use their knowledge of human nature and command of rhetoric to pursue selfish ends. They are acutely aware of the phenomenon of mass society and of the machinery of mass persuasion and social control. Consequently, they are too insightful to be manipulated and too ethical to enjoy manipulating others.

They have a vision of a better, more ethical, world, which includes a realistic knowledge of how far we are from that world. They are practical in their effort to encourage movement from “what is” to “what might be.” They gain this insight by struggling with their own egocentric nature and coming to see (in deeper and deeper ways) their own involvement in irrational processes.

No one becomes a fair-minded thinker first and a selfish person later.

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